



## Evaluation of The Mayor's Stepping Stones programme

Executive summary

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## Introduction

The Mayor's Stepping Stones programme (2018-2020) aimed to support vulnerable young people in their transition from primary to secondary school.

The programme supported 15 secondary schools in 10 London boroughs experiencing socio-economic deprivation to deliver peer mentoring and five other transitions-focused activities. These included summer schools, Stepping Stones lessons, careers-based activities, community mentoring and work with primary schools. In total, 15 funded schools supported over 2,079 Year 7 pupils in their transition from primary to secondary school, of which 507 pupils had Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Traverse was commissioned by the GLA in August 2018 to undertake an independent evaluation of the Stepping Stones programme. This followed an evaluation of the pilot programme by Traverse (formerly OPM Group) in 2016-17.

This summary outlines the aims of the evaluation and its methodology, before setting out the main findings. These findings are presented in five sections: impacts on Stepping Stones pupils; impacts on mentors; wider programme impacts; and key programme learning. The summary ends with conclusions and recommendations.

## Evaluation aims and methodology

The evaluation aimed to investigate the impact and process of the programme to assess whether it achieved its desired outcomes. In doing so, it aimed to build on the existing evidence base of what works to support successful transition to secondary school for vulnerable pupils. The evaluation adopted a mixed method approach across three strands:

- An outcome strand with a quasi-experimental design, which included self-selected historical comparison groups (by schools).
- A process strand that sought to identify learning including success factors, challenges, and recommendations for future delivery of the programme; and
- An economic strand that sought to establish the economic impact of the programme on the education system and wider public finances.

The evaluation design was validated by [Project Oracle](#).

## Impacts on Stepping Stones pupils

The evaluation demonstrates that the Stepping Stones programme had a positive impact on the academic progress, behaviour and attendance of vulnerable young people in Year 7, especially for pupils with Special Educational Needs and Pupil Premium status. This builds on the pilot programme evaluation findings.

## Academic progress

Primary to secondary school transition can present particular challenges to academic progress. Pupils suffer a 'learning loss' over the summer break, before having to learn while adapting to new school structures, subjects and expectations. The evaluation demonstrates that:

- There is strong evidence to suggest that the Stepping Stones programme had a positive impact on academic progress, especially in Maths where there was a



5.1% improvement in academic progress compared to historical comparison groups. All four schools that returned pupil performance data had at least one cohort where the proportion of pupils at or above expected progress levels in Maths exceeded the historical comparison group. Pupils with Special Educational Needs and pupils in receipt of Pupil Premium saw similar improvements.

- The programme also appears to have had a greater impact on boys than girls. For boys in Year 7, progress in English for both cohorts was better than the historical comparison group.
- Direct links between Stepping Stones activities and pupil progress were less clear than for behaviour and attendance, though there were examples where peer mentors helped pupils manage their approach to school and homework. Several coordinators reflected that improvement in behaviour and attendance as a result of Stepping Stones would in turn contribute to improved progress and attainment.
- In contrast to behaviour and attendance, however, the proportion of Stepping Stones pupils at or above expected progress in English and Maths in Year 8 across Stepping Stones schools was lower than in Year 7. Although no historical comparison data was available, this may suggest that some pupils struggle after 'exiting' the Stepping Stones programme and its support.

## Behaviour

Not all pupils joined Stepping Stones programmes with a record of behaviour issues. However, evidence suggests that where young people are anxious about or during transition, this can lead to challenging or disruptive behaviour in school. The evaluation found that:

- Overall, there was an estimated 1.1% fall in exclusions compared to historical comparison groups. This was mainly due to improvements among pupils with Special Educational Needs. Four of five schools that returned exclusions data had at least one Stepping Stones cohort where the proportion of pupils with an average of one or more exclusions was lower than the historical comparison group.
- Stepping Stones helped socially anxious, or shy, quieter young people improve their social confidence. In particular, pre-term summer school activities helped these pupils to meet new friends and get to know the school.
- Peer mentoring and Stepping Stones lessons helped young people who struggled to control their behaviour improve their self-awareness and maturity.
- The proportion of Stepping Stones pupils with one or more exclusions was lower in three of four schools in Year 8 compared to Year 7 (though no historical comparison data was available to contextualise this pattern). This suggests that these pupils made a successful transition, though sustained change could be susceptible to how well pupils cope with new challenges from Year 8 onwards.

## Attendance

Poor transition can also affect pupil attendance rates in Year 7, which is linked to attainment. The Department for Education expects young people to achieve a 95% attendance rate. The evaluation used this as a benchmark and found that:

- Overall, there was an estimated 5.5% increase in attendance compared to historical comparison groups. Four of seven schools that returned attendance data





had at least one cohort that exceeded their historical comparison attendance rate. Three of these schools also saw an increase in average attendance rates in excess of 10%.

- The programme appears to have had a greater impact on the attendance of boys than girls. Three of six schools that returned disaggregated attendance data saw boys exceed their historical comparison attendance rates by 10%+.
- Summer schools helped directly address many of the fears that socially anxious or shy pupils had about secondary school, which increased their confidence and supported attendance early in the school year.
- The evidence suggests that community mentor activities and 'breakfast clubs' also supported attendance among more vulnerable groups of young people.
- The attendance rates of pupils either sustained or improved in Year 8 in five of eight schools (though no historical comparison data was available to contextualise this pattern). This further suggests that Stepping Stones pupils made a successful transition to secondary school.

## Impacts on mentors

Peer mentoring was one of the core activities of the Stepping Stones programme. Mentors were typically Year 10 pupils, selected by schools for their perceived ability to act as a positive role model and/or benefit from the programme themselves.

Involvement in the Stepping Stones programme helped to encourage a positive change in the behaviours of mentors. This was especially the case where mentors had been selected, at least in part, to help support their own development and behaviour, though this was not successful for all pupils. This included reduced behavioural incidents linked to mentors modelling good behaviour as an example to others. It also included examples of increased active bystandership in schools, where peer mentors intervened to resolve issues between younger pupils.

There was also evidence that these behavioural changes were driven by changes in personal qualities and skills as a result of training for and undertaking the peer mentor role. This included increased maturity, self-confidence and communication skills. This builds on the pilot programme evaluation findings.

## Wider programme impacts

The evaluation found that the Stepping Stones programme also had an impact on:

**Parents.** This mainly focused on reduced anxiety about their child's transition. There were also examples where schools developed the programme and worked directly with parents to improve engagement.

**Teachers.** The programme provided teachers in some schools with a clear focal point around which schools organised transition activities, which helped to systematise transitions support.

**Schools.** The programme contributed to a culture shift in school communities, characterised by more positive interactions between pupils in different Key Stage groups and year groups. Stepping Stones also helped some schools improve their transitions support offer and internal processes, as well as creating or strengthening relationships with local primary schools through increased interactions.



**Economic impact.** The findings of the evaluation's economic assessment suggest that the programme more than pays for itself: for public services as a whole, the Return on Investment (over a 12-year period) is 198%. This is broadly in line with the evaluation of the pilot programme and adds further evidence that the programme more than pays for itself in terms of the social value it generates. The point at which the cumulative benefits of the programme meet the costs of delivering the programme is 3 years and 2 months.

For education providers, the Return on Investment (over a 12-year period) is 154%. This indicates that, although a significant proportion of the benefits accrue to other parts of the public sector, the benefits to schools are also more than sufficient to outweigh the costs of the programme.

### Key programme learning

The Stepping Stones programme encouraged adaptation and innovation among funded schools in how they delivered the programme. Schools were required to deliver the core peer mentoring element of the Stepping Stones programme but, unlike in the pilot programme, were free to pick and choose between the five other programme activities in line with the needs of their pupil population.

The result was the delivery of 15 distinct programmes that adopted varied approaches to pupil recruitment, combined different Stepping Stones elements and delivered different types of activities. Key considerations from the evaluation around programme design and management are summarised below.

Headline benefits and lessons learned for each activity are on the next page.

### Programme design and management

The evaluation found the following considerations to be the most important issues that underpinned the design and implementation of Stepping Stones programmes.

**Programme coordination.** Management worked best when built into a senior staff member's role to support the visibility of the programme. It was also important for the management of key activities to be delegated to other staff. Where schools kept the role centralised, particular problems arose when these staff left the programme.

**Recruitment approaches.** A more focused approach with smaller numbers of pupils engaged in core activities (such as peer mentoring) kept programmes manageable and best supported pupil outcomes. Alongside pupil selection, schools highlighted the value of pro-active parent and pupil engagement to create a positive perception of the programme.

**Recruitment timelines.** Recruitment into/out of the programme should be flexible for at least the first term of the school year. As reported in the evaluation of the pilot programme, primary school data and pupil observations were useful in assessing pupils in the first instance, but staff should continue to monitor pupil support needs (and potential inclusion in the programme) during the first few weeks of term.

**Programme timeline.** Programmes should start in advance of the school year. The summer school and Stepping Stones activities early in the autumn term were identified as critical delivery points in support of pupil transitions. In particular, the summer school helped identify pupils who would benefit from the programme and provided key support in advance of the year.



Activity	Cost per student	Benefits	Learning
<b>Peer mentoring</b>	£137	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pupils can access positive role models, advice and homework support, increasing self-esteem and confidence.</li> <li>Mentors develop in maturity, contributing to improved behaviour and a wider sense of community between year groups in schools.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Both 'high achievers' and pupils that still experience challenges can be effective mentors with the right pupil, but the latter need sufficient support.</li> <li>Early training at the end of Year 9 ensures mentors are sufficiently prepared.</li> <li>Works well when profiles of mentees and mentors are reviewed to ensure a match of interests, backgrounds and lived experiences.</li> <li>Sessions before school may require additional incentives such as free breakfasts; or schools can integrate sessions into the formal school timetable (e.g. form time).</li> <li>High visibility programmes can motivate/help to support good mentor behaviour.</li> </ul>
<b>Stepping Stones lessons</b>	£63	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides schools with creative opportunities to help pupils explore and reflect on feelings and behaviours, especially disruptive pupils.</li> <li>Helps increase pupil self-esteem and address anxiety related problems.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Templates can be easily and quickly adapted to school contexts.</li> <li>Lessons can be incorporated as/within PSHE lessons to overcome timetable challenges and/or use specific lessons to support more vulnerable groups.</li> <li>Passionate member(s) of staff can help to ensure effective delivery.</li> </ul>
<b>Summer school</b>	£233	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Particular benefits for people who struggle with social interactions or anxiety; helps overcome fears in advance of the school term.</li> <li>Helps pupils make friends and get to know teachers and school layouts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Works best as a social – rather than an academic – space.</li> <li>A breadth of activities ensures there is 'something for everyone'.</li> <li>Can be hard to engage the most vulnerable pupils and parents; schools need to be particularly mindful of pupils not able to attend summer schools at the start of term.</li> </ul>
<b>Community mentoring</b>	£91	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Particular benefits for pupils with behaviour that challenges – provides a non-judgemental space and relatable role models.</li> <li>Also helps pupils gain social confidence through providing opportunities to talk with and work alongside peers and adults.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Works best delivered outside of a school space and/or classroom, which enables pupils to feel more relaxed.</li> <li>Pupils benefit from less structured sessions where they lead conversation.</li> <li>Can be difficult to identify a reliable, affordable external partner amid a crowded market of providers.</li> </ul>
<b>Aspirational / careers-based activities</b>	£34	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Holds particular benefits for raising aspirations about what pupils can achieve in the future, which also supports pupil motivation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Finding the 'right' representative is essential to making careers seem relatable and achievable. Local community members tend to fulfil this.</li> <li>Can be difficult to organise amid a crowded school timetable and gain parental permission.</li> </ul>
<b>Primary school engagement</b>	£52	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides schools with a better understanding of new Year 7 pupils; more targeted programme.</li> <li>Builds awareness among parents of transitions support – and improves perceptions of schools.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pupil observations help teachers to better understand knowledge/behaviours.</li> <li>A valuable opportunity to engage parents early ahead of transition.</li> </ul>



## Conclusions and recommendations

The evaluation provides evidence that the Stepping Stones programme has successfully supported the transition of two cohorts of vulnerable pupils from primary to secondary school. The programme has also left a clear legacy of new or developed transitions structures and practices in funded schools.

As the programme ends, funded schools have built on its momentum and are continuing to deliver Stepping Stones activities to the new 2020/21 academic year amid the COVID-19 pandemic. It is notable that most schools plan to continue peer mentoring and Stepping Stones lessons in the future – these are activities that required resource to ‘set-up’ and adapt within the school, but fewer ongoing costs. In contrast, fewer schools are continuing the more expensive elements of the programme that require products or services to be purchased in addition to or outside of standard school activities on an ongoing basis, such as summer schools, community mentoring or aspirational trips.

Key recommendations from the programme include:

<b>For 2018-20 programme-funded schools</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider ‘step down’ activities for more vulnerable pupils as they enter Year 8.</li> </ul>
<b>For other schools interested in Stepping Stones activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Management of the programme works best at a Head of Year or Transitions level, with visible buy-in from senior leadership.</li> <li>• Key programme activities (such as peer mentoring) should also be devolved to reduce risk around staff turnover.</li> <li>• The peer mentoring and summer school activities are consistently linked to improvements in attendance and academic progress and should be considered the core of the programme. Schools with a limited budget should focus on peer mentoring, Stepping Stones lessons and a targeted summer school to improve value for money of the programme.</li> <li>• The programme is easier to manage and works best when its core elements are targeted towards Year 7 pupils most in need of support. Some elements such as Stepping Stones lessons can be easily delivered to year groups.</li> <li>• Stepping Stones holds clear benefits for less ‘traditional’ mentors, who might be experiencing challenges around their own behaviour. However, not all mentors will excel in the role and adequate support is needed to ensure that mentees do not suffer where this approach does not work.</li> </ul>
<b>For the GLA</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure a long lead-in between commissioning and the start of the new academic year on programmes of this type, to enable schools to fully prepare and deliver early transitions activities in advance of the year.</li> <li>• Consider what support relevant partners in funded education programmes might need to overcome obstacles that might otherwise limit their engagement.</li> <li>• Continue to provide a mix of face-to-face and online shared learning events.</li> <li>• Ensure that educational toolkits have clearly stated aims, objectives and uses to set them apart in a crowded market of resources.</li> <li>• Incorporate a more rigorous evaluability assessment phase to establish whether schools have the necessary capacity and resource to meaningfully contribute to impact assessment.</li> </ul>



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